

The Road to Emmaus *after the painting by Caravaggio*

It's not the friendliest of villages, Emmaus,
the people parochial, as desert people are,
bound up in the herding and bartering of beasts,
the vines on its terraces encumbered with thorns,
the children in the market roasting a sparrow,
hardly the place to expect revelation,
if revelation's the word – I leave that to you.

Not that we'd never believed, my partner and I,
not that, but leaving Jerusalem on business,
with news of the death, or perhaps I should say
the absence among us of someone like a GΩd,
we felt at a loss, and not a little diminished,
and talk as we might, of covenants and creeds,
our thoughts came round to the prices of wool,
the bundles of raisins and dates in our panniers.

Besides, by then we were tired of religion,
what with the heat, the dust, a mule going lame,
and the stranger who'd fallen in with our journey
going on about prophets, the life in that death,
a vision which didn't make much sense at the time
but stirred our hearts greatly, before we tired,
and hungry and irritable, slapping at the flies,
entered Emmaus and tethered our beasts.

That it should, that it could have been otherwise
presumes, I think, too much of human piety
and grants few gaps for love's irruption
unbidden, uncalculated into our lives.

His hands, the strong sunburned fingers
breaking the rough brown bread of the tavern
and writing a cross in the spaces between us,
above the wine in the cracked clay goblets,
the dim yellow sputter of the wick in its oil,
his hands first brought it home to us, in Emmaus.

There was a silence, a humming, a burning,
the coming more alive of all things about us,
those arms, opened, their palms in shadow,
embodying a promise, a blessing still live.

And then? Ah, the sting of it still afflicts me.
A breeze off the desert entered that moment,
the lamplight flared, a door banged shut.

Emmaus, as I say, we never really go there,
Emmaus comes to us, when least expected.
It's not just the journey, the settings out,
the routes through the desert, the arrivals,
it's travelling in readiness for Emmaus that counts.